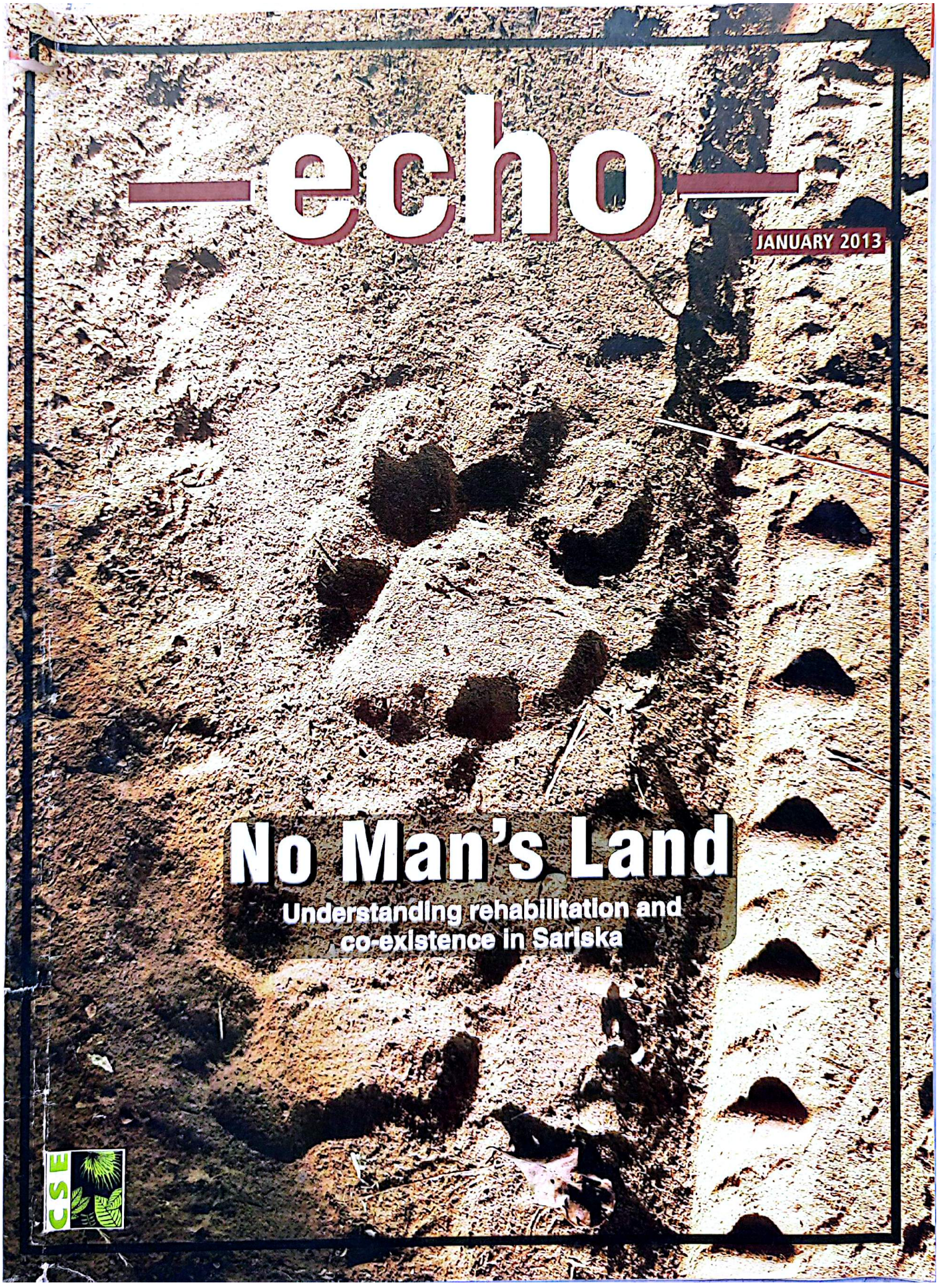
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JANUARY 2013
No Man's Land
Understanding rehabilitation and co-existence in Sarlska
CSE

Challenge of the Balance

(December 17, 2012 to January 5, 2013)

'Challenge of the Balance' is an interdisciplinary environmental orientation program involving participants from around South Asia. Keeping this in mind, the first phase of the program has been designed in such a way that the participants from various disciplines and background can arrive at a common understanding of contemporary environmental concerns including the climate change and **environment – development debates.** Experts from Center for Science and Environment (CSE) and other institutions came as resource persons and conducted interactive lecture sessions.

In the second phase of the program, a field visit was organized where the participants got the privilege to visit Alwar and Jaipur districts in Rajasthan to observe people-led traditional water harvesting systems and several lakes in and around Jaipur including the revived Mansagar lake. A safari inside the Sariska National Park and visits to villages relocated from inside the park provided important insights into the complexities of relocation and the conflict-ridden rehabilitation process.

The third phase involved preparing a journalistic product, in this case a magazine in which participants report their experiences from the field. This phase is significant as it helped participants dig deeper into situations and communicate their reportage to a wider audience.

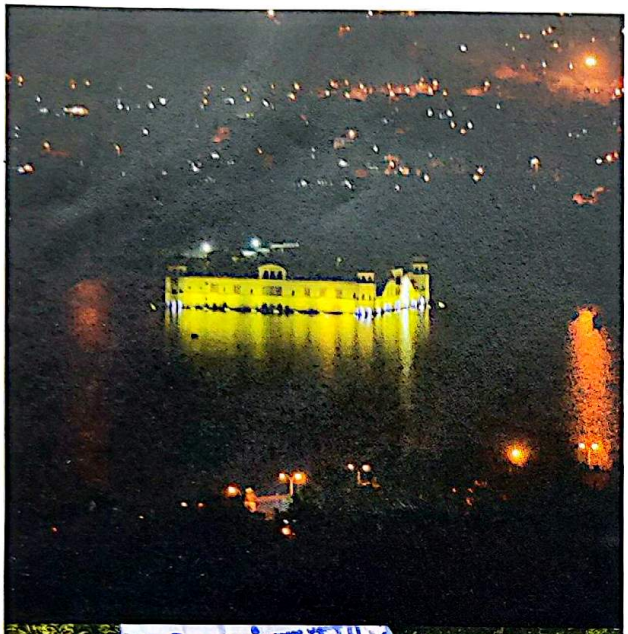
TRAINING VENUE: Anil Agarwal Green College, 38, Tughlakabad Institutional Area, New Delhi–110062

COURSE CONTACTS

Aditya Batra, Programme Director, Education & Training & South Asia Programmes, Email:aditya@cseindia.org
Mobile: +91-9810825775

Sharmila Sinha, Deputy Programme Manager, Education & Training, Email: sharmila@cseindia.org; cseindiasharmila@gmail.com
Mobile: +91-9818482018, Office Tel: +91 (011) 29955124 +91 (011) 29955124/125, Fax: +91 (011) 29955879

Centre for Science and Environment
41, Tughlakabad Institutional Area,
New Delhi – 110062



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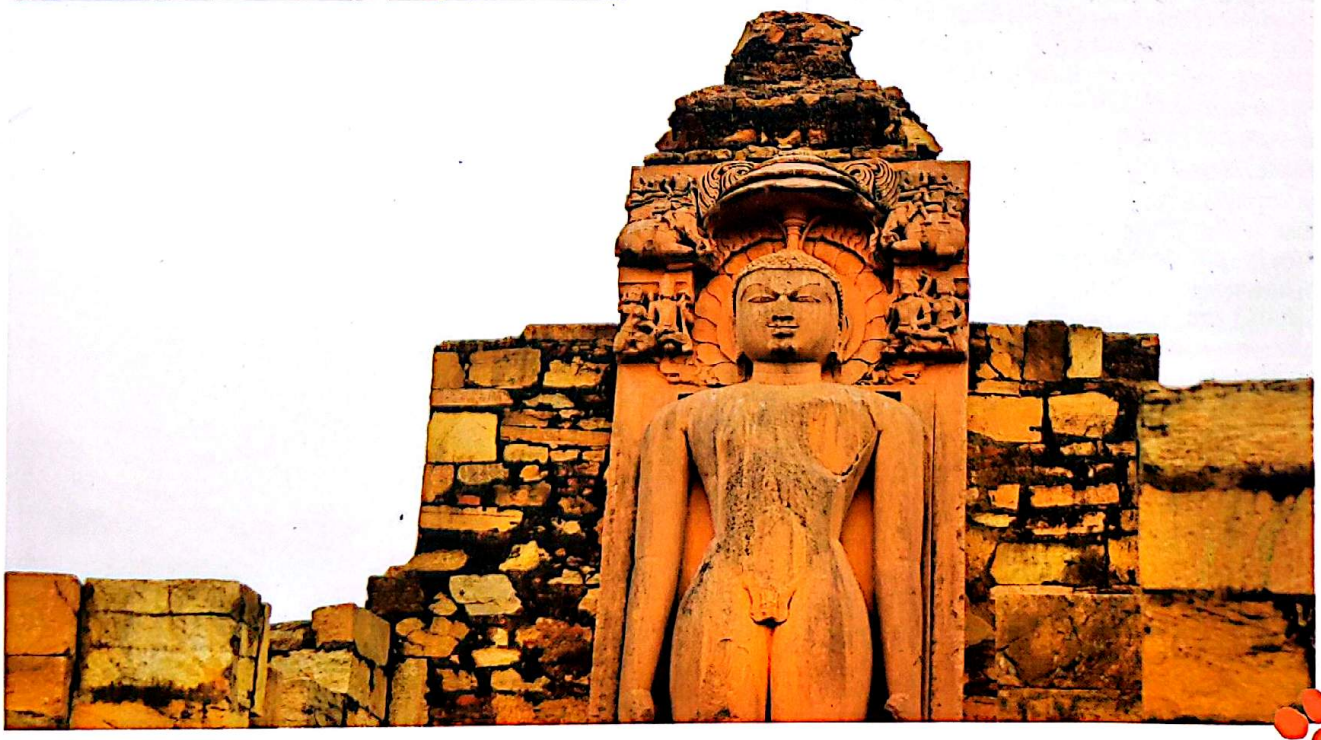

EDITORIAL

Editors
Saher Baloch
Shalu Agarwal

Copy-Editors
Apoorva Bhatia
Shreya Bhat

Design & Illustrations
Showvik Das Tamal

Reporters
A B M Adnan Faisal
Azam Khan
Apoorva Bhatia
Bhawana Gurung
Deep Raj Uprety
H Daminda Prasada Sumanapala
Krishna Kumar Saha
Monika Agarwal
Prabin Pokharel
Razoana Moslam
Saher Baloch
Shalu Agarwal
Shreya Bhat
Showvik Das Tamal
Subhas Karki
Subhash Acharya
Sumeet Sharma
Tariq Mureed
Taslima Islam

Cover photo
Showvik Das Tamal

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The countries of South Asia share similar concerns of environmental conservation, sustainable development and the impending threat of climate change. The programme 'Challenge of the Balance' organized by the Centre for Science and Environment gave us the opportunity to examine all these concerns keeping regional needs in mind.

Doha 2012 has been in the news, and there is tremendous debate about issues related to climate change. But to the communities we interacted with at Alwar and Jaipur, climate change was an abstract idea, and they were more concerned with their immediate situations. To villagers who have been relocated out of Sariska, they could not understand why they had to leave the land they had tilled for generations, for land that they cannot call their own. To those who live in what was once an arid water-less area, their concerns were more the proper use of the water they had so painstakingly managed to conserve. The extent to which they are involved in the processes of their environment demonstrate how traditional wisdom could be instrumental in formulating and implementing state policy.

It was through this exposition that we all came to understand that the environment is everything around us and we all need to act in our individual capacities rather than wait for higher authorities to take action. However, if any conservation endeavour that does not properly include communities, there is always the risk of not being able to balance developmental and conservation needs. This is best exemplified by the dissatisfaction and angst amongst the villagers relocated out of Sariska Tiger Reserve.

During the safari ride through Sariska, we saw a few villages within the core area which are currently doomed to be relocated. The very fact that such villages have existed in tiger inhabited area for centuries forced us to raise a question as to why conservation today requires 'inviolate spaces'. We received two contrasting viewpoints- that of a forest official as conservator and the other of a community representative calling for coexistence.

We observe that whenever a community has a stake in its surroundings and the resources it depends on, conservation becomes a part of its culture. This same principle applies in the cities. As seen in Jaipur, the absence of interest on the part of locals resulted in the deterioration of Mansagar lake and other urban lakes. The same trend is seen across South Asia.

With rapidly changing lifestyles and a culture of materialism, people in urban areas are becoming more and more disconnected from their immediate environment, and less empathetic towards the people and animals they share it with. This shows in the increasing trend of abandonment of pet dogs and the ill-treatment of domestic workers.

This magazine is a part of our attempt to reconnect with our environment, to question what we see, and to report the different issues that affect both cities and villages, people and animals. ■

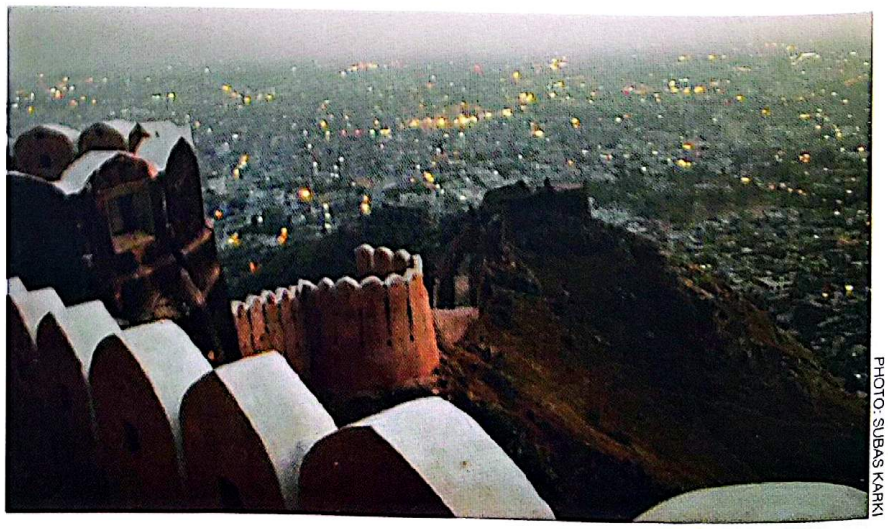

PHOTO: SUBAS KARKI

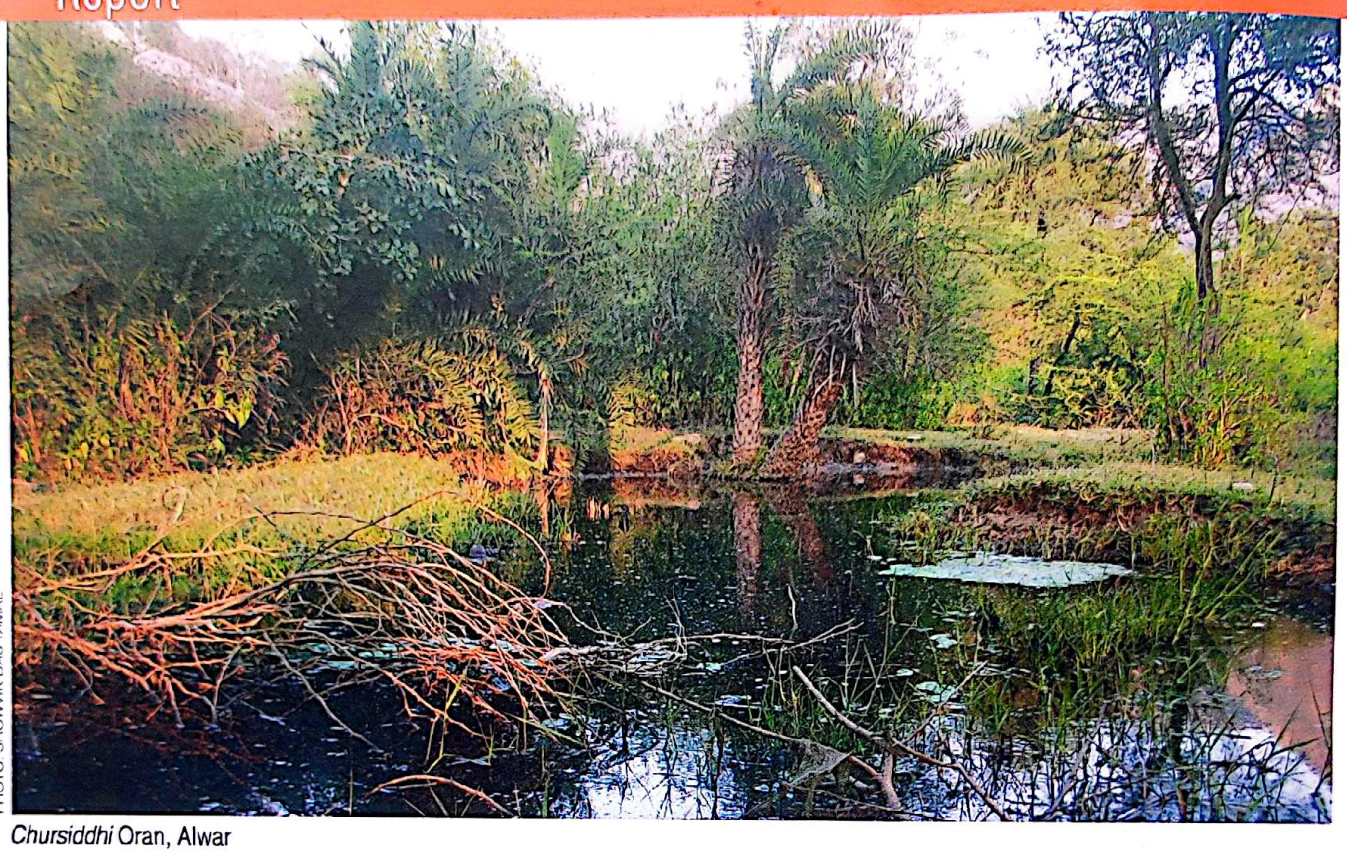

PHOTO: SHOWVIK DAS TAMAL

Chursiddhi Oran, Alwar

Oran Puran

Community-managed sacred groves, vital biodiversity reserves, face extinction

By Adnan Faisal and Showvik Das Tamal

A walk through the mustard fields of the village Pagdandi, and one finds oneself in a lush green grove. The air is laden withe aroma of wet soil, and trees of khair, ber, ket and date flourish. One cannot believe that while a stream runs through the grove, there are parts of Rajasthan adjacent to this very spot where there is very little rain and no water. This forest if one of the 25,000 Orans or 'Dev van' in Rajasthan.

Sacred community forests

The Chursiddhi Oran, one of the many Orans in Siliser Cheend, near Bakhatpura village of Alwar acts as a micro bio-diversity reserve and is a community managed ecosystem. These local forests vary in size from a hunded to five hundred bighas, and usually contain a source of water. Each Oran is associated with a deity, hence the name 'dev van' or abode of God. These community managed groves epitomise a centuries old tradition of forest and water conservation.

Nanak Ram Gujjar (72) of Bhakhatpura describes a seven member elected committee, traditionally known as Thain, that makes rules and regulations to regulate the management and use of natural resources from the Oran. It is mandatory for all villagers to follow collective decisions.

The traditional practice of conserving Orans is in danger as many Orans have degraded, shrunk, dried up or been diverted for non forest uses

A Saint (Mahatma), usually from another village, is entrusted with the responsibility of guarding and preserving the Oran, and enforcing the rules laid down by the Thain. His primary duty however is to take care of the shrine of the deity of that particular Oran.

Orans have a series of water harvesting structures made by the community. An upstream dam of loose boulders, some earthen johads or bunds, and finally a masonry check dam are used to obstruct the rapid runoff after rainfall. As the area is usually dry sloping land prone to soil erosion, these bunds and check dams also help prevent soil loss. In turn, the increased percolation allows the recharge of the water table, and provides surface water which is used for agriculture or livestock needs. The ample soil moisture encourages plant growth and provides subsistence for fauna, and livelihood needs of the local livestock dependent communities.

Orans are a source of fodder, fuel,

timber, berries, roots and medicinal herbs. Grazing of livestock is done in turns and in certain seasons, and minor forest produce can be collected only with permission and not for commercial purposes.

Shrinking heritage

However, it is unfortunate that these Dev vans are facing a threat. The traditional practice of conserving Orans is in danger as many Orans have degraded, shrunk, dried up or been diverted for non forest uses. The Chursiddhi Oran is one of the few revived by collective efforts of community and with help from KRAPAVIS (Krishi Avam Paristhitiki Vikas Sangathan), an NGO led by Aman Singh.

Singh explains that legally Orans were once categorized as cultivable wasteland. Since the 1950's these were divided into protected forest land and revenue land. Now, Orans are classified as being revenue land and communities have no ownership over them. Now, this land is often diverted by the government for mining or other non-forest purposes without consulting the communities dependent on these groves, rendering them devoid of access to natural resources and pushing towards further marginalization.

Silver lining

The Rajasthan Forest Policy, 2010 for the first time included a section on Orans. It recognizes Orans as community managed systems which would be provided necessary legal and financial support. It also envisages the preparation of a district-wise database and inventory of Orans. So effectively, communities have now acquired a bargaining power and a voice to prevent any future diversion of these sacred groves in arbitrary manner.

Legally Orans were once categorized as cultivable wasteland. Since the 1950's these were divided into protected forest land and revenue land. Now, Orans are classified as being revenue land and communities have no ownership over them

PHOTO: SHOWVIK DAS TAMAL

Mahatma's temple, Alwar

Gosainkunda lake of Nepal is a fine example of 360 degree collaboration of people and institutions for lake and biodiversity conservation, driven by the norms of religion, culture and socio-economic imperatives. Government of Nepal, district development committee and community based 'Gosainkunda Area Development Committee' work together through 'Tourism for the rural poverty Alleviation Programme' (TRPAP). Eco clubs in school, women associations manufacturing handicrafts and campaigns by Lama Gurus further ensure that conservation itself becomes a norm rather than a need.

— Subash Acharya

However, the ownership complexities have not been addressed and the land continues to be government owned. Further, the policy allows formation of a committee consisting of local members or temple trustees for managing the Orans. This would institutionalize the committee as a body parallel to Panchayati Raj Institutions or PRIs which can give rise to conflicts. At the moment, Panchayat agrees to decisions of the committee in matters of Oran. This is also because of the fact that Thain also have representatives from Panchayats.

The committee mentioned is not mandated to be elected and therefore runs the risk of domination by socially dominating castes. In Chursiddhji Oran managed by two major castes Meena and Gujjar, conflicts have recently arisen. Notwithstanding these concerns, the Rajasthan Forest Policy has gives. Further legislation and regulations to facilitate independent and fearless management of Orans are required. Orans are sacred and integral to the way of life of these communities. Their significance can only be understood by witnessing the landscape itself, and the close relationship its communities have with it. ■